

Squawking

Student Naval Aviator

By Lt. Hugh Winkel

It was a crisp night in January, with a beautiful moon over Kingsville, Texas. My class was preparing to walk for one of our last night field-carrier-landing-practice (FCLP) periods before doing the real thing at the boat. Just before walking, somebody mentioned something about fog. I didn't think too much of it because I figured the fog would be workable, or, worst case, we would cancel at the hold short.

Man-up was uneventful, and I could see the fog. Even though the airfield was clear and a million, I could see a wall a couple of miles off

base. Our flight of six T-45s marshaled, taxied and checked in at the hold short. The fog bank looked to be parallel with the runway but still a mile or two away. Tower cleared us to switch paddles and to launch in order. After watching Dash 1 through 3 roll, I ran-up quickly and was on the roll.

As soon as I released brakes, a conversation started between Dash 1 and paddles. Dash 1 recommended cancelling because the downwind was unworkable. The fog bank was about 1,500 feet high and quickly moving toward the field.

As I rotated, I realized we would be cancelled. I thought, “No problem; I’ll just keep Dash 3 in sight and follow him around for a full stop.”

That’s when the “fun” started. Paddles cancelled the event and recommended picking up a ground-controlled approach (GCA) because the fog already had started to obscure the left runway. Approach was overwhelmed by student naval aviators checking in, out of order, looking for a GCA pickup. I stuck to my game plan. I followed Dash 3, and switched to approach control on the deep-high downwind. Approach started to sort out the aircraft by assigning squawks in order. Because it was taking a while for approach to acquire radar contact, I decided to help. Being the student with global situational awareness, I figured out my squawk and started an orbit away from the field at 3,000 feet. I was going to get out of the way, squawk the appropriate code, and wait for approach to catch a breath.

like an eternity (probably 10 seconds) before I was safe on top. A few moments later, approach grabbed me for vectors, and I flew an uneventful ILS to the right. The fog had obscured only the left runway.

If you are a problem solver, sometimes you can be your own worst enemy. Why would anybody in their right mind stop flying an aircraft, twist their body around, and jam their head down behind them to fiddle with a piece of gear? I don’t know, but I did it.

Now, I always fly the aircraft, then navigate, then communicate. If something unusual comes up, as it always does, it takes a back seat to the big three. I can’t solve problems as quickly while concentrating on flying first, but it sure beats a smoking hole in a farmer’s field. 🦅

Lt. Winkel currently flies with VAW-113.

Safely established in a right-hand turn and clear on top of the fog bank, I felt smug listening to approach pick up other aircraft for vectors. All I had to do now was squawk.

I looked down at the right-side console and saw the Mode 3 backlighting was burned out. I grabbed my flashlight and started wrestling with the two center push buttons. They were sticking, and I had to pry them loose with my fingernails every time I advanced a number.

Suddenly, it dawned on me: Nobody was flying my plane. When my head snapped up, I was IMC, 45-degrees AOB, and descending through 800 feet. I simultaneously leveled the wings, went to MRT, and pulled up. It seemed

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